

word count: 2,028

Young Women from Mosul Describe Life Under Terror and ISIS

Introduction:

Mosul was changed dramatically with the invasion of ISIS. The fall of Mosul to ISIS is reported to have taken place on June 10, 2014, after the Iraqi army had curiously abandoned the city, leaving it unprotected. However, even prior to this, the area had been experiencing disruption and some acts of terrorism. (For the origins of sectarianism and ISIS, see “Iraq Report: The War Never Ended”.)

According to a UN Habitat report, “City Profile of Mosul, Iraq: Multi-sector assessment of a city under siege”:

Like the rest of Iraq, Mosul city and its surrounding areas have witnessed a growing wave of extremism and sectarian and ethnic violence following the collapse of the former regime in 2003. The escalation of fighting, particularly between 2006 and 2008, has sparked a mass exodus of thousands of people from their home towns towards safer areas and destinations. Mosul city itself has acted as both a receiving city of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and as a rejecting one. Enormous numbers of Muslim Sunnis, of both Turkoman and Arab origin, fled their towns and villages south and west of Mosul and sought safety in the city, among a predominantly Arab Muslim Sunni population. Conversely, a great number of Mosul’s ethnic and religious minorities (Christians, Kurds, Shabak, Turkoman Shia and Yazidis) fled to other areas, in some cases under direct threat of violence.

In late May 2017, Sami Rasouli of the Muslim Peacemaker Teams went to Mosul to assist in escorting members of his wife’s family out from near the Old City where ISIS fighters had been in control. ISIS had been driven from the area at the time, but residents related horrible stories about what they experienced during the last two years and a half. These stories corroborated the stories that a number of women related when they visited Najaf and spoke at the University of Kufa.

The following are the actual testimonies of young women who wrote them in the English language. They are mothers, professionals, and students whose lives were severely disrupted. Their accounts are published here as they were written and were only very minimally edited for common English grammar or to achieve clarity of meaning. These are accounts of their experiences before, during, and after the ISIS invasion.

Hind Khalid, a 25-year-old engineer from Mosul: “I lived in hard conditions in Mosul, even before ISIS. My father was kidnapped and all the family threatened.” She continued, explaining how she lost everything after ISIS took control: “We left Mosul after the ISIS invasion. ISIS took our house. Then during the battle of the Left Coast our house was damaged by shelling... We don’t have anything in Mosul to return to.”

Rahma Walid Yassin is a 24-year-old married woman, the mother of two children, who describes herself as a Muslim from the Retina [disambiguation: Sabak, an ethno-religious group] minority: “My husband was kidnapped for ten days by ISIS and severely beaten. His nose was broken and he was seriously injured all over his body. My father was also beaten and left in a remote area. He was hospitalized for 15 days for damage to his head and body. My four-year-old son was kidnapped for several hours and then returned with a message to which a bullet was attached. The message told us to leave our house and get out of Mosul. We are currently living in Arbil [Erbil].”

Salma Farooq, is a mechanical engineer and writer from Mosul: “For 952 days my life was under the rule and control of the organization of terrorism. A city lost its history. The city was a great prison as a whole. Inside there was injustice and the violation of the most basic human rights. We, the women, suffered a lot at this stage, deprived of our normal activities and happiness.

Every house was a small prison. We did not see the light of life. We did not leave the house for several days at a time, fearing that they [ISIS] would speak to us and in their own way punish us for exercising what we have a right to exercise: freedom of movement outside and in our own homes. They imposed black dress on us that disguised all of our features. They prevented us from going to the market alone or riding in a taxi alone, never taking into account our circumstances and our needs.

We were denied all means of communication with the outside world and we fell behind in study and development in the field of science.

Under this psychological warfare, we wondered: Will I survive or not? Will I know what it means to be free again or not? We know the value of life and of breathing freely. We need a chance to prove that we are not terrorists. We are peace loving.”

Maya Ramadhani, a 24-year-old former resident of Mosul who describes herself as an activist, explains how dangerous life was in Mosul even for ordinary Sunni Muslims: “As far as my life in Mosul, I lived in a war zone, and although I am one of the majority of Arab Muslim population, I nearly got killed four times by suicidal attacks in the streets.” She says leaving Mosul was very dangerous, as well: “I left Mosul three months after the ISIS invasion. On our way to Baghdad armed militants almost killed us because I am a Sunni Muslim and people believe we are all ISIS members.”

Maysam Salim Botany, a 28-year-old engineer describes more than one heartbreaking displacement. Her family had already begun life anew in the Nineveh Plains, an area east of Mosul, with a largely Syriac Christian population. Many who had been driven from Mosul moved there when sectarian violence forced them out in 2010. “I am a Christian and I lived in Mosul before ISIS invaded. We lived in a new region in Nineveh and tried to start another life, yet ISIS invaded our region and we had to leave again. After the liberation of our region we went back to see our new house burned down with all our belongings! Today I don’t have anything of my family’s heritage, not even family albums. I am a person without a history.”

Nour Mahdi: is a 29-year-old engineer from Mosul: “I was a Shia living in a Sunni community. I had to keep my sect a secret out of fear of terrorists in Mosul. I left Mosul in 2014 after I was injured in a terrorist attack—me and my colleagues were heading out to a friend’s funeral when a car exploded next to ours! Then when we moved to Najaf (a Shite city); I became the Mosuli emigrant in a Najafi community.”

Rand Laith Aziz: is a 24-years-old medical student. “I am an Iraqi Christian. I used to live in Bakhdida, one of the Nineveh Plains outskirts southeast of Mosul, and this is my story—the story of life crucified, of culture destroyed, of people massacred by creatures—so-called humans. Our life ended three years ago when we were forced to leave our hometown on the sixth of August [2014]. It was a miserable night. The church bells commenced ringing in an alarming way, declaring full evacuation of the area as a notorious militant group called ISIS continued heavy shelling and was making major advances into the area. Everyone, including my family and me, was stunned by the ominous news that kept flowing about our location. I refused to believe a single word of what was said, but my father insisted and the sound of the falling shells made me realize the situation.

It was near eleven that night when we decided to leave our place to reach a safe haven. Leaving was the only thing that could keep me alive. We got into our car with only identification papers and a single bag of clothes and headed into the unknown with dozens of other vehicles flooding the road. Sight was compromised by the dust raised with the pandemonium of cars. We followed one another’s taillights.

After four hours we were thankful to reach Erbil, 51 miles away from Mosul where we took refuge in the city’s churches among massive crowds fleeing the intense clashes as ISIS militants had progressed swiftly. I stayed in Erbil under depressing circumstances. Some media outlets proclaimed that invading forces looted and burned our assets back home.

In January of 2015, I moved to Kirkuk province to complete my medical studies, as I strongly believed that engaging in study would help me recover [from the trauma of losing her home and everything she had know]. I started to recover from what I’d been through and thought I was fully recovered until something awful happened again.

I was residing in a students’ dormitory provided by and supervised by a local cathedral. The night of October 21, we residents were woken up by the sound of bombs and clashes. At dawn around five a.m. we became worried by the sight of a couple of armed militants in our front yard who were not dressed in uniforms but were carrying RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) on their shoulders. We knew the situation was serious as one of them started shouting “Allahu Akbar”, the slogan of the ISIS group.

We became even more frightened when these militants entered the front room of our residence and started firing from our dormitory toward a nearby military and government base! We were only a room away from ISIS members. I had an intense desire to scream and I was shivering but we realized that a single noise from us would draw their attention and it would be our last move. We lie on the floor breathing quietly. I was breathless from the smoke of their guns and so scared. Then when I could I crept to the window holding my cellular [cell phone] and started

recording till I heard a loud explosion in the front yard, which followed shouts of “Allahu Akbar”. That turned out to be a suicide bomber.

Then army militants and police started firing at our dormitory as they believed that it was an ISIS stronghold. This continued until midnight when ISIS militants were killed by local police and we were evacuated to another shelter where we stayed for more than twelve hours. At this time we heard intense clashes and the sound of firearms and the falling missiles that made everything shake.

The next morning ISIS militants were thwarted. We were taken back to Erbil where I currently reside.

It was the hardest and most awful night and I was traumatized for months. I can't forget the horror I've seen from the destruction of war and hate. I wonder when this will end. I am very grateful and thankful to the Lord for being alive. This in itself is a blessing.”

Sandra Salim Elias is a 25-year-old lawyer from Basheka, twenty kilometers (approximately twelve and a half miles) east of Mosul, who works with girls and orphans. She is of an ethno-religious group, Azidi [disambiguation: Yazidi or Yedizi] that ISIS made a particular target, mistakenly believing them to be devil worshippers. In Sinjar west of Mosul, ISIS killed men and forced women and girls into sexual slavery. Escaping ISIS, Azidi were marooned on a mountain starving until finally rescued by Kurdish militia. She describes the effect of the ISIS occupation on the Azidi: “I am working recently as a social worker in an Azidi Solidarity and Fraternity League NGO. When ISIS came to Basheka, me and my family left our home and we lost everything. I never saw ISIS, but I saw my relatives and friends who had suffered from them. I helped many girls who survived from ISIS and I worked in a campaign for helping orphans who lost their parents due to ISIS.”

Conclusion: *Though they will be affected forever by what they have experienced, these young women are safe for now and trying to rebuild their lives. Their hope is that others will come to understand how damaging war and violence in all its various manifestations is for humanity.*